

HOW TO WRITE BOOK REVIEWS

It is essential that you, future historians, learn to write a proper book review. That ability is, in many ways, at the very foundations of the history profession.

A book review is not the same thing as a book report, which simply summarizes the content of a book. When writing a book review, you not only report on the content of the book but also assess its strengths and weaknesses. A good review indicates the scope of the book, identifies its points of view, summarizes its main conclusions, evaluates the use of evidence, and—where possible—compares the book with others on the subject.

To understand your own reaction to the book, you need to read it carefully and critically. As a critical reader, you are not passive; you should ask questions of the book and note reactions as you read. Your book review then discusses those questions and reactions. Though there is no real correct way to structure a review, the following is one possible approach:

- Summarize the book and relate the author's main points, or theses.
- Describe the author's viewpoint and purpose for writing the book.
- Note the importance of the evidence the author presents.
- Evaluate the author's use of evidence. Are the arguments presented convincing?
- If possible, compare the book to other books or articles you have read on the same subject.
- Conclude with a final evaluation of the book. You might discuss who would find this book useful and why.

Easily the worst habit in writing a book review is to summarize the book's contents rather than its arguments. Let us suppose you are reviewing a biography of John Kennedy. The temptation is to write about Kennedy rather than about the book. This is a sure path to disaster—and a bad grade. Kennedy had, to put it mildly, an eventful career. You are certainly not going to do him (or his career) much justice in a few paragraphs. And you are not, in all probability, going to find that much that is fresh or interesting to say about JFK.

So you need to remind yourself as forcefully as possible that your job is to review the book and not the subject of the book. Does the book focus narrowly on Kennedy or does it also go into the general history of the nation during his lifetime? Is the author sympathetic to Kennedy, tending to see things Kennedy's way? Does the writer attempt to psychoanalyze Kennedy or stick to political and economic questions? Is there a firm command of the available evidence (as presented in the footnotes and bibliography)? And does the author have something new to say about Kennedy and his times? If so, how well documented is this new interpretation?

You should generally not comment on whether or not you enjoyed the book. That is undoubtedly an important consideration for you, but it is of little interest to anyone else. And also keep in mind that "critical" does not mean negative. If a book is well written and presents an original thesis supported by convincing evidence, say so. A good book review does not have to be negative.